

# THE GREEN CARPET RATIONALE COLLEGE MANAGERS TRY TO SURVIVE

By John L. Hart

*College and university Grounds Managers are finding their budgets severely tightened. Here are the reasons why grounds funding is shrinking, a bold approach to reverse the trend and help your institution at the same time, and some specific strategies to employ in attaining this goal.*

## The situation in higher education

Higher education is being forced to consider days of declining enrollments and declining interest in the college degree. The harsh facts are that the number of 18-year-olds in the population has begun to drop, and among that lessening number the proportion enrolling in college has been declining for some time. Whether a home-town college of 500 students or a mega-versity of 50,000, the pinch is here or gravely anticipated.

Reactions may vary from the "see-no-evil" syndrome or blind fear to sound fiscal planning, but regardless of the approach, the golden years of the Fifties and Sixties are one to three decades in the past. Budgets will be cut and staffs will be reduced. Public or private, small or large, sectarian or secular, a decrease in services (administrative, academic, and auxiliary) is inevitable.

What does this mean for grounds maintenance personnel and for you, the grounds manager? To a large extent it depends on your institution's approach to the exterior campus, and on your ability to demonstrate to superiors the continuing and increasing value of yourself, your staff, and your services. Since this is not necessarily a clear-cut task, some background material on the campus situation may help clarify the problem.

When the budget cuts come, the maintenance/support staff is usually particularly hard-hit. Academic departments argue that declining faculty will force students to go elsewhere for better programs; administrators, who finally make the budgetary decisions, feel that top management cannot realistically be pared—who would then make the management decisions which would save the institution? The area that remains is the physical plant, including the Grounds Department. The faulty argument is that the facilities and grounds can slide a few years without apparent damage.

So when the crunch comes to the college, the physical plant is usually dealt a disproportionate share of the reductions. Where can cutbacks be made? Unfortunately, it is usually in the support

personnel staff itself. Most plant departments cannot cut back significantly and continually on supplies such as fuel, paper products, floor wax and lawn mowers. Indeed, given the astronomical rise in the costs of such materials, this budget might more sanely be expanded.

Conservation can undoubtedly help, but selling a large conversion program is difficult when money is scarce. Further, supplies are only a portion of the budget. Excluding utilities, most of the cost of running the plant is tied up in personnel. Thus, the maintenance staff often bears the burden of financial cutbacks directly — people are simply ruled a lower priority.

The top decision-makers realize of course that on-going maintenance of buildings and grounds is important and necessary, but there are additional reasons — some good and some not so good — for reducing the service budget.

Firstly, it is undeniable that there are often inefficiencies in that (or any) department. If productivity and efficiency can be increased, so it is reasoned, the work can be done by fewer people. The transition period in such a situation is difficult indeed. Supervisors and foremen must be prepared for the difficult decisions of where to cut staff and/or services and how to achieve a new and sufficient stability. There may also be significant staff morale problems, and the manager will certainly have to work a lot harder at efficient yet responsive supervision.

The ability to successfully relate to and manage the people resource, and to correctly identify priorities, will be — as always — the supervisor's principal responsibilities. The importance of a good manager cannot be overemphasized; to a large extent he will be the difference between the program succeeding or failing. But in spite of such problems a shift to reduced staffing has been successfully undertaken and accomplished. That it can be done in all situations, or even that such a radical approach is in most cases the most reasonable and effective one, is highly questionable.

Secondly, it is commonly rationalized by upper management personnel that "temporary" cuts in maintenance services can be weathered: some services can be cut back and preventative maintenance programs can be curtailed or put on hold until the fiscal sky brightens again.

The problem here is that the weather outlook is pretty damn gloomy. Reductions in services and preventative maintenance programs may well be permanent, resulting in rather stormy predictions for the long-term condition of buildings and grounds. The permanence of the reductions, as well as the resultant decline of facilities, would seem apparent to all. The contrary is often the case. Even at this late date many institutions, especially those who feel they cater to a particular group (based on religion, social class, locale, race, etc.)

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feel themselves — and themselves alone! — peculiarly immune to the obvious statistics. Thus a reduction in maintenance staff, falsely seen as temporary, can only too easily be rationalized.

For an excellent expansion of some of these ideas, and for some sensible approaches to the problems of management during these times of fiscal cutbacks, see a paper by Dr. Harvey H. Kaiser, "Reduction Planning: Managing in an Era of Declining Resources" (NACUBO Professional File, Vol. 8, No. 7, Sept. 1976).

A third force, and a strong one, behind disproportionate cuts in maintenance and grounds budgets is the political situation: not the next elections, but the in-house politicking that goes on at every school. The faculty may squabble endlessly among themselves and work out its own priority system for who goes and who stays, but they can present a large, strong and united front when seriously threatened by the administration and regents. The upper levels of administration also represent a great deal of power, especially when directed at self-preservation. Both groups can be tight-knit and exclusive, are well-educated and skilled at debate, and have the audience of the final decision-makers.

It is unfortunately rare for the facilities and grounds managers to be in close and direct contact with either of these higher-level groups, or with other administrators on the same level. Periodic cross-staff managerial meetings help, of course, but unlike the groups mentioned above, there may be little understanding either horizontally or vertically as to what the real needs and problems in the physical plant and Grounds Department are.

Given a choice between cutting academic programs, valuable administrative functions, or custodians and groundskeepers, the outcome at a college seems obvious. In the latter case, the cut is quick, an immediate feeling of austerity is achieved, and the upper levels are relatively undisturbed.

This is perhaps the most disturbing fact of all.

### **The green carpet rationale**

The reasons are many for the first and most severe financial reductions during college or university fiscal cutbacks to be carried out in the Physical

Plant area. When that occurs and it comes to setting new priorities within the division, the grounds portion is often the one to suffer most quickly and most heavily. A well-kept and developing exterior campus is viewed as an expendable luxury. Like white side-walls and extra chrome on a new car, grounds care is seen as being easily reduced, while still retaining the basic, practical, functioning thing. This is largely based on a lack of understanding of the complexities and importance of grounds care, coupled with a recognized need to preserve other programs and services within the Physical Plant and within the college.

In the midst of this pressure from the top on down to cut grounds maintenance and development programs, what can be done to prevent degradation and deterioration of the campus? How can the Grounds Department maintain its standards, its already tight schedules, its often marginal maintenance operations, much less the improvements which are needed?

Actually a very logical answer lies in increasing the grounds budget. This is a serious suggestion that has more to do with states of mind than with fertilizer and irrigation, and more to do with university realities than with life cycles of aphids. A period of financial stability and fear on campus — particularly as this attitude soon seeps out into the public arena — is the very time when the utmost attention must be placed on good grounds upkeep. Higher echelons must be convinced of this fact, and convinced to act accordingly. The Grounds Manager must go to work in new fields: public relations, business, sales and debate.

The reasoning behind this is obvious but often overlooked:

- Appearances are extremely important.
- The college is a business.
- People need to be sold on an idea.
- To sell an idea you must believe in it, hence it must be good.

To expand on these statements, appearances are important and first impressions are crucial. Returning to the luxury vs. no-option car, the real estate agent, though he may be near bankruptcy, will choose the white-walls, the extra chrome, and

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even a cherry on top if available as an option. His chances of selling a house will be far greater than if he drove the practical stripped-down model. Likewise, the house he sells will sell much faster and for a higher price if the lawn is well-tended, and trees and shrubs plentiful and healthy. Moreover, the effects of good appearance are compounded by the particularly lasting effects of the first impression. The house interior may be a relative disaster area, with no light switches on the ground floor and an upstairs bathtub leaking through the kitchen ceiling, but these are somehow transformed into minor problems if the exterior is first perceived as attractive, well designed, and nicely groomed.

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The feeling provided by a beautiful campus may be an important aspect of the student's ability to enjoy the college and to absorb education efficiently.

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This applies in similar fashion to the campus. Increasingly, education is becoming a competitive business enterprise. Students are pursued aggressively by the Admissions Department, made up basically of salespersons, the product for sale being not just education but the college itself. Increasingly, enrollment is the name of the game. Prospective students are mailed color brochures with no few photographs of the grounds, and are brought to campus by the busload to "look around". Many have little idea of what they want in terms of education, so that their highly subjective "feeling" for the place may be a very decisive factor in their choice. And this feeling is influenced considerably by that lasting first impression and the personal experience of the campus environment. Indeed, if environmental psychology has some sound basis, this feeling may be an important aspect of the student's ability to enjoy the college years and to absorb the education efficiently.

These ideas also pertain to another source of college revenue, the prospective donor. Quite often, the donor is one who has been successful in business or as a professional, and has been successful as a result of good investments and shrewd business sense. Also quite often, he views the possible donation to the college as another investment, one with less tangible and often eccentric rewards, but still an investment.

As in business dealings, this person needs to be convinced that the investment will be a sound one. Unmowed turf or weeds in the flower beds will have a far different affect on the "business deal" than a neatly manicured lawn and a well arranged weed-free floral display. This is equally true for the alumnus, another type of donor and one who is very interested in positive change and progress at the Alma Mater.

The first impression and the perception of the total college environment may be far more important in getting a pledge than all the dinners, tours and cajolings put together. For all the selling of the college by development personnel, the eyes have it in the end.

Likewise the college is in a continuous state of being marketed to its own in-house community of regents, administration, faculty, staff, students, and in some cases state legislators. This is particularly true in an era of fiscal reduction, when those intimately involved with the school are most disgruntled, worried, depressed, or angry. The exterior environment surrounds everyone, continuously molding impressions, affecting morale, and influencing attitudes. Given the atmosphere created by budget cutbacks and very personal fears, they want to be reassured, they want security, they want serenity.

Although some changes must come, and may indeed be welcomed, nonetheless a sense of stability and continuity must be maintained at all costs. Nowhere is this more important and more pervasive than in the campus exterior. A walk to the union for lunch past an overgrown hedge surrounded by last week's party cans will be very different psychologically than the same walk past a well-trimmed hedge and an uncluttered campus. Multiply this walk by four times a day and 500 or 5,000 people: the total effect is enormous.

Thus, in the real sense that the campus is everyone's front yard, and additionally a welcome-mat and symbol of the college, grounds maintenance and development should be among the **highest** priorities and among the last to undergo budget reductions. An appearance of strength, stability, progress, and good business-like management must be maintained and improved upon.

This is not a particularly novel idea — certainly Madison Avenue has been using it for decades — but in many cases it has been slow in reaching the Grounds Department. Once it does, and once you believe it, the next step is to jump on the mower and cut a wide swath. That is, the college must understand the concept, accept it, and help implement it. The most logical person to spearhead this "Green Carpet" campaign for environmental awareness and improvement is the Grounds Manager.

#### **Implementing the green carpet plan**

If a college draws its belt one notch tighter, the Physical Plant Division is required to go three and the Grounds Department five. That's a significant squeeze, especially if the belt was snug to begin with.

In a real sense the campus is everyone's front yard, and a welcome-mat and symbol of the college. Grounds maintenance and development should be among the highest priorities. The grounds manager is the logical person to lead this "Green Carpet" campaign.

Such a bold step should not be taken hastily. There is a great deal of necessary departmental

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analysis and evaluation, followed in turn by delineation of program alternatives, making public the alternatives, eventual acceptance and implementation of one program, and finally (always!) renewed evaluation of its successes and failures. This is basically a simple management outline, but one geared to the problem at hand: how to deal with the college fiscal crunch, and even come out ahead — both the grounds and the college.

**Departmental Evaluation.** In any good management scheme, evaluation of the department and its operation is less a step than a constant and continuing process. When a budget reduction has been implemented or is foreseen, the time is particularly ripe for a complete and in-depth investigation of the organization. Can any supplies be cut, or sources changed? Is each piece of equipment the proper tool for the job? Can rates of equipment turnover be changed without hampering the work? Can little-used or "back-lot" equipment be traded for more useful tools? Is energy being conserved or over-consumed? Can high maintenance areas be re-designed cheaply and aesthetically? Does contracting make better sense than doing a job in-house, or vice versa? Are people being properly employed, or should some be shifted horizontally or vertically, or should some have been replaced months ago? Are you using your time efficiently and productively? Is there good communication with and support from higher levels, and from other segments of the college? Are there possible sources of additional funds which could be explored? How are time and money being spent? What are the priorities — and why?

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Cuts to consider may be redesigning high maintenance areas, contracting out infrequent tasks, trading in old equipment for more efficient models, and finding other sources for funds for the department.

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**Delineation of Program Alternatives.** While making this in-depth analysis of the department, three different levels of operation should be considered: Preservation, Maintenance, and Development. These must be delineated as clear alternatives, keyed to the possible fluctuations in the college fiscal situation. **Preservation** is the bare-bones, base-line budget, in the event of a present and inescapable financial crisis. When the college is seriously considering shutting its doors — and afterwards — this level of funding will preserve the investment and nothing more. The budget might include almost all vehicles in storage, a crew of two

workers (or contract) to keep the campus up to government code and to do maintenance chores infrequently, a basic utilities outlay, low-level up-keep on paved surfaces, etc. This is the "shock-therapy" budget, and it is a healthy thing to do: it may demonstrate new methods of approach to old problems, it may energize the Grounds Manager and others to help prevent such a collapse, it will show that a wide range of alternatives is being analyzed, and if nothing else, it will make clear the bare essentials of the grounds operation.

The **Maintenance** budget alternative represents a situation most likely better than that which now prevails. It should represent what the Grounds Manager sees as a strong, healthy grounds management and maintenance operation. This might include a full productive staff and crew, periodic salary increases, the proper equipment, timely replacement and updating of equipment, sufficient supplies and stockpiles, a reasonable budget for expansion and development, etc. This level certainly makes provision for that extra truck or additional Groundskeeper II, and if followed will eventually lead to completion of the campus grounds development plan. It is a budget geared for environmental improvement: The Green Carpet.

The **Development** level is the "blue sky" budget alternative. It is in essence the long-term development and management plan for the campus grounds. Given a high level of resources, it is what the grounds manager sees as the desired, ever-progressing future of the campus: healthy, lush vegetation is well-placed and expanding, flowers are in increasing abundance; all walks and drives are functional and attractive; old eyesores are gone or hidden, and more outdoor sculpture and comfortable plazas add to an improving general atmosphere; grounds vehicles and equipment can reliably handle any in-house task; the grounds hierarchy is efficient and effective, and the grounds crew is sufficient in quantity and quality to see that the work is of high standards and is accomplished on time.

Developing this alternative allows the grounds manager to re-evaluate and re-structure ideals, to be reminded of the over-all goals of the operation, to retreat for a moment from the daily routine, to sit back and dream. The plan as developed on paper will show the manager and others where the campus is headed. It is a highly positive alternative, and the discrepancy between the present and the future state should provide a high level of enthusiasm and motivation.

The above three alternatives should be the only possible programs to be considered. They represent the two extreme situations — unlimited budget and budget collapse — and offer a third, middle-of-the-road approach to be taken in all other college financial situations. Additional alternatives will only serve to create conflict and confusion, clouding the real issue: in all but the worst of financial regimes, the Grounds Department must be allowed to progress toward its short-term and long-range goals. Further, there is room for compromise, if necessary, within each of the three alternatives. Each contains both higher and lower priorities, and

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the reasoning behind such rankings. So while the alternative programs should be clearly delineated and bundled into neat comprehensible packages, there is room for compromise much later down the road when the actual bargaining begins.

**Marketing.** People may cringe at the terminology, but marketing — or spreading the word, if that phrase is more pleasing — is wise and necessary. As the college must in a sense sell itself to prospective students and donors, the grounds manager must sell his or her grounds program to superiors, to the administration as a whole, to the faculty and students, and to regents and donors. As previously mentioned, the college or university is a highly politicized organization and people's votes must be won. Once the alternatives for grounds management are detailed and clear, it is time to let others know what each alternative will mean for the campus and for the college. This phase should focus on the Green Carpet plan, but also must make people aware of the upper and lower alternatives: the dream, and the disaster.

Where should this marketing start? Hopefully it would have begun at a much earlier stage with the personnel immediately above and below the grounds manager. This would include not only direct information presentation from the manager, but also valuable feedback and improvement from the same department. Beyond that sphere, it is surprising how many on campus are highly receptive to the idea of quality grounds maintenance and improvement. Faculty in such departments as Art, Botany/Biology, and Athletics will be especially interested, for obvious reasons, along with selected persons in Admissions, Development, and the Administration. Further, there will be certain faculty and staff with special related concerns, such as sculpture, roses or other flowering plants, architecture, lawns, or general campus appearance and beautification. A wide range of people today have special environmental or artistic concerns, and would like to see — and help realize — environmental improvements. These must all be sought out and convinced.

Beyond that, a larger number of people will be interested in the campus appearance if they can but hear the grounds manager's ideas and plans. In fact, many will be excited and enthusiastic about proposed improvements and changes, even during hard times. The only work is to make such people aware of the situation and get them talking. This needn't be difficult, particularly after gaining the obvious interests previously mentioned. Informal meetings with faculty and staff, talks over coffee, or short presentations at lunches are simple and valuable. A more formal slide-show presentation open to the college community is not much work and may reap large rewards. Simply increasing the time out on the grounds will foster meetings, expressions of interest and concern, and discussions of the campus future. It is, after all, everyone's concern.

**Acceptance.** It is very likely that a great deal of interest and support will be generated in a very short time. Particularly during an era of relative crisis, the college community will be caught by the idea of grounds progress and change — these are indeed healthy changes.

Once support is mustered, it is time for action. This may come through the normal chain of command, or through a leap-frog action to a higher official, up to the President, or through a special committee the Grounds Manager has helped inaugurate to consider the question. There will probably be less resistance and more enthusiasm than is imagined. After all, the ideas are sound, the support is there, and the expense is minimal relative to other operations. This may seem simplistic, but if the foundation has been properly laid, the outcome is almost a forgone conclusion. It is not a mat-

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ter of empire-building or self-preservation, but a step toward preservation of the college.

If the plan is accepted only in part, it may be time for compromise. If it is rejected as a package, there is enormous error in plan or approach. While deprecators will surely be present for a variety of reasons, they should not be in the majority. If so, the manager must solicit feedback from the college community, re-evaluate and modify the proposals as necessary, and try again.

**Implementation.** Once the Green Carpet plan has been accepted, it must be efficiently and conscientiously implemented. If the initial evaluations, establishment of priorities, and concrete proposals are valid, the final step is simple realization of those plans. The process is good management.

The Grounds Department will be even more visible than in the past, and it must meet the college community's expectations. More than any other department, the Grounds Department is on continuous public display. It must be well-organized, well-trained, understand its tasks and goals, and pursue them with efficiency, knowledge, and diplomacy. All of these qualities must emanate from the Grounds Manager.

And once the plan is in effect and running smoothly, the time is ripe for re-evaluation, for this is the essence of any well-managed operation. The Grounds Department must continue to demonstrate its worth and value, and good management is the key.

In conclusion, good grounds care won't save a mismanaged college, or a college with chronic student decline. The grounds budget cannot be expanded at the expense of rapidly deteriorating buildings. Four new groundskeepers can't be hired when the faculty is losing ten professors. The point is that the campus Grounds Department must be granted a higher priority than it has received in the past, and that the benefits for the college will be significantly greater than the costs.

In the end, the eyes will have it.

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